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SUBJECT: CAMEROON'S NORTHERN PROVINCES: EMBASSY TEAM
REACHES OUT

[11](#). (U) Summary: During a September 21-27 trip to the Extreme North, North and Adamaoua Provinces, the Ambassador launched a Virtual Presence Post (VPP) for the region and did extensive public outreach. The northern provinces are poor and largely agricultural, suffering from the effects of a declining cotton crop and weak infrastructure. Development has been hampered by limited air connectivity to the region, poor roads and no rail service north of Ngaoundere. Security challenges include highway bandits, chieftaincy disputes and Chadian refugees who have become violent in recent months. End summary.

[12](#). (U) On September 21-27 Ambassador led an Embassy team on a tour of northern Cameroon, reportedly the most populous part of the country, with the largest percentage of Muslims. The week-long trip included a presentation of the Embassy team to an audience of fifty contacts in Garoua, American folk music performances by Embassy staff in each provincial capital, presentations on upcoming U.S. elections, a Ramadan Iftar for Muslim women, meetings with business chambers in each province to discuss U.S. commercial opportunities, visits to Self Help projects, meetings with Peace Corps trainees and Amcit wardens, and a wide range of meetings with officials, business, civil society and other contacts. The Ambassador also toured the CIFAN (Centre d'Instruction Forces Armee National) military training site in Ngaoundere. CIFAN will be used to prepare an 800-person peacekeeping/peace enforcement battalion, with training scheduled to begin in December.

Economic Challenges

[13](#). (U) The economic mainstay of the three northern provinces is subsistence agriculture, supplemented by some commercial production of cotton, sorghum, ground nuts, shea nuts and other crops. Agricultural production has reportedly been good this year, although poor soil conditions, small parcels of land, and water shortages are chronic problems. Officials at Sodocoton, Cameroon's largest (partially state-owned) cotton producer painted a bleak picture for the cotton sector, which employs over 300,000 people in the three northern provinces. They attributed a 75% drop in cotton production since 2005 to low world cotton prices and a significant jump in global fertilizer prices; Sodocoton officials hoped for Government of Cameroon (GRC) subsidies and greater crop diversification (more septel).

[14](#). (U) There is little industry in the northern provinces. Our business outreach meetings drew mostly petty traders such as people in the handicrafts sector. While the north has tourism potential, few contacts saw this sector on the rise.

Governor of the Extreme North Ahamadou Tidjani told the Ambassador that there was only limited potential for tourism, given infrastructure challenges and the "abandoned" conditions of the Waza and Benoue parks. For example, the only access to Rumsiki, one of the region's main tourist destinations, is a rutted dirt road requiring a four-wheel drive vehicle. There were no flights to the north for four months this year and while Elysian and Air Tumai (the Chadian airline) now fly several days a week to Garoua and Maroua, flights are expensive and not always reliable. Direct flights used to come from Paris to Garoua (filled mostly with American hunters) but these have not resumed over the past year.

15. (U) Contacts complained about the rising cost of living in the north. Chadians seeking safehaven from instability in Chad have been buying property in the major cities of northern Cameroon, driving up housing costs. Transport from Douala and elsewhere in the country is expensive. Corruption permeates every aspect of life, with authorities demanding bribes at frequent check points. Many children reportedly cannot afford school expenses and education levels are low.

Security Issues

16. (SBU) UNHCR Rep in Garoua Kantemanke told the Ambassador that 4,000 Chadian refugees remain in Langui camp outside of town. While he acknowledged that some refugees might be genuine cases, he thought the majority were staying in hopes of going the U.S. or Canada. Kantemanke hoped UNHCR would

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soon reach agreement with the governments of Cameroon and Chad to facilitate the return of most refugees. He commented on the aggressive nature of these refugees, who had destroyed vehicles and other property in the camp during June riots protesting the availability and quality of food, clothing and other items. The GRC has since provided security at Langui but Kantemanke was convinced there were still arms in the camp and he was frustrated that the GRC had yet to name a camp manager.

17. (SBU) The north has a persistent problem with "coupeurs de route" (highway bandits) who attack vehicles as well as villagers in rural areas, reportedly kidnapping children and stealing cattle and property. While the Nigerian border area is reportedly calm, local authorities expressed concerns about heavily armed bandit incursions from Chad. There are also recurring chieftaincy disputes. One Catholic priest in the region described a pervasive culture of fear, saying that "people fear everything - superstitions, the government, everything."

Commercial Opportunities

18. (U) The Ambassador and Embassy staff hosted three business seminars with about 50 participants each in Garoua, Maroua and Ngaoundere. Participants highlighted the need for more capacity building to take advantage of AGOA, especially in the handicrafts sector. They were eager for information about EXIM, OPIC and other USG commercial services and several expressed interest in upcoming U.S. commercial trade shows. Embassy staff also identified areas for greater cooperation with the Peace Corps and local business chambers in strengthening commercial ties to the north.

Muslim Outreach

19. (U) During the trip, the Embassy team hosted an Iftar dinner in Garoua specifically targeting prominent Muslim women, including mayors, members of parliament, heads of religious associations, high-ranking officials and journalists. During the dinner, participants noted the

challenges facing Muslims in general and women in particular, including the role traditions play in impeding women from taking part in political life and the problem of underscholarization among young women due to agricultural duties and early marriage. The delegation also accepted an invitation to an Iftar dinner hosted by Bakary Bouba, the influential Lamido of Maroua (a traditional and religious Muslim leader), at his palace. He discussed the political, cultural and religious situation within his community and briefed the Ambassador on his recently-completed International Visitors program on Religious Tolerance and Interfaith Dialogue. The Lamido was extremely complimentary, both of the IV program and his experience in the United States, and described at length his positive exchanges with Christians, Jews, and other Muslims during the visit. He particularly enjoyed his interchanges with ordinary Americans during his home visits and said he was struck by the welcoming nature, piety, and timeliness of Americans.

VPP Launch

¶10. (U) The Ambassador announced the creation of VPP Septentrion/Northern Cameroon ("Septentrion" is a Cameroonian term referring to the three provinces of the north) during the initial country team presentation, and the delegation took the opportunity to inform contacts and press about its launch throughout the trip. Despite the large population, the Septentrion is often difficult to reach physically by Embassy staff due to the lack of infrastructure and cost and infrequency of flights. The VPP demonstrates the importance the Embassy places on the Septentrion and will serve as a conduit for informing the population of Embassy visits, activities and opportunities within the region.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) The Extreme North and Northern provinces seem largely stuck in time, with little new development and

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crumbling infrastructure. Northerners feel cut off from the rest of the country and to some degree neglected for political reasons (the north was the home of former President Amadou Ahidjo and is a bastion for the opposition UNDP party). This in part explains the very warm reception Ambassador and Embassy team received everywhere we went. The trip received extensive, positive media coverage. Our Muslim contacts and business people at our commercial outreach events were particularly eager for more interaction with the Embassy. We plan to continue our more active engagement through the newly-created VPP and with regular trips to the region.

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